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A SUGGESTION REGARDING ESTHETICS

IN the past esthetics has been approached from three different angles—the critical, the philosophical, and the psychological. On the whole these three methods of approach are fairly distinct, and generally a book on esthetic subjects can be unhesitatingly placed in one of these three classes to the exclusion of the other two.

Examples of the critical method of approach are in literature such books as those by Matthew Arnold, Moulton, Brander Mathews; in painting those by Van Dyke, Berenson, Harold Speed; in music those by Dickenson, Prout, and the like. The approach is personal. These men look at a work of art in the same way that a newspaper critic does; indeed, many of these men were newspaper critics at one time in their lives, and have come to differ from the general run of critics only by the superiority of their judgment and power of expression. They are looked upon as experts like wine tasters. The public wants their opinion on art, and they give it to the best of their ability. From the point of view of the public it is a matter of faith and authority; from the point of view of the critic a matter of long experience crystallized into a sort of intuition.

It is entirely a personal matter. That does not mean that it is a capricious matter, a question of mere opinion. The opinion of a trained critic is never a mere opinion. It is the outcome of long experience. What I mean by saying it is a personal matter is that it is wholly a relation between a single critic and an inquiring public. His judgment is what is wanted, and the basis of his judgment is a secondary matter. His intuitive reaction is sought, not the rational and scientific background for the reaction. Often when a critic is asked why he holds an opinion, he finds it very hard to explain. And that is no paradox, for a golfer can hit a ball squarely and yet find it impossible to explain how he did it. It is because a critic often does not know the reasons for his judgment that he falls to ridiculing a work of art, concealing his embarrassment with laughter. The smaller the critic the truer this is, for a great critic is willing to stake his reputation on his judgment whether he can give reasons or not.

Even if a critic does give reasons they are likely to be in the nature of aphorisms, half truths half recognized as such, just one remove from an immediate intuitive judgment. And in general the more universal and sweeping the judgments a critic makes, the less valuable; just the opposite from science where the more universal the law the more valuable. The critical method of approach is not scientific, not disinterested, and dispassionate, accepting the authority and experience of nobody but only the logic of the facts; but on the contrary is wholly a matter of personal experience and authority. It is, therefore, not a suitable method for a science of esthetics.

Now, by saying that the critical method is not scientific, and therefore that it is not applicable to esthetics, I am by no means saying that it is a useless approach. On the contrary, if we should ever have an established science of esthetics with a vast classification of facts and verified laws, we should still want critics to be doing then just what we are doing now. For a critic is to esthetics a good deal what a doctor is to physiology. There is nothing a doctor knows that is not to be found in physiology, yet doctors have not outlived their usefulness. We still call upon them to diagnose our ailments, and consider them much better for that purpose than physiologists. And so in the future, if the future has in store for us a science of esthetics, we shall appeal not to an esthetician but to a critic for a judgment about any new school of art. And presumably the critic of this future will have studied esthetics as the modern doctor studies physiology, and will be as much superior to the modern critic as the surgeon of the present is to the barber of the middle ages.

The second method of approach was philosophical. Examples of this method are the esthetic writings of Kant, Hegel, Croce, Bosanquet, and the like. The assumption behind this method is that esthetics is a branch of philosophy inseparable from it, and therefore to be treated philosophically. The first thing to do is by a process of analysis to define beauty, and then we may draw the consequences. The logic of this approach is quite convincing; for, it is argued, how can we know that anything is beautiful until we first know what beauty is? It would appear that our first effort should be to define beauty.

But in spite of the plausibility of this argument there seems to be a quantity of evidence from external sources to show that we can learn a great deal about a subject without waiting for a definition of it, indeed that perhaps the definition has to wait until we have learned this great deal about the subject. We have a very respectable science of biology though we are still uncertain

about the definition of life, and a very respectable science of chemistry though we are still uncertain about the definition of matter. Furthermore, we now feel well assured that our definitions of life and matter never could have amounted to much prior to our sciences of biology and chemistry which we developed without finished definitions. Of course, we had crude definitions to keep us from going completely astray, definitions that we were willing to change from time to time as the facts seemed to indicate, but both of these sciences have been developed without that finished definition which philosophically seemed to be the first prerequisite of science. Even mathematics does not follow the philosophical method. The definitions of number and quantity have undergone various changes as one discovery or another would suggest, and only recently have been redefined. Even mathematics, the so-called deductive science, developed without a perfect definition of its subject matter. That finished definition, judging from the testimony of the sciences, is the last thing to be determined in the development of knowledge rather than the first.

The science of esthetics, therefore, does not have to wait until philosophy can give it a finished definition of its subject before it can proceed to accumulate data. All it needs is some working definition. A father does not keep his son at home until he can send him into the world with a complete fortune; he gives his son some pocket money and sends him into the world to make his fortune. And now, of course, I do not mean that speculation as to what that ultimate definition will be is valueless. Our curiosity is impatient, and we wish to speculate about the complete nature of things before we have complete knowledge. To see things as a whole as well as possible is the function of philosophy, and that is no little thing. But philosophy can still continue to seek the true definition of beauty while the science of esthetics is plodding in the dust of facts, and may perhaps be willing occasionally to pick up some slight suggestion out of the dust. Philosophic interest in the ultimate nature of life and matter does not seem to have been damped by scientific activity in biology and chemistry.

The third method of approach was psychological. Of this the work of Lipps, Hirn, Fechner, and a swarm of men whose articles appear in psychological periodicals, are typical. The implied argument of all these men is that since the appreciation of beauty is a conscious experience, esthetics is necessarily a branch of psychology and obviously falls under the domain of the emotions. When the psychology of the emotions is developed, it will then be a simple matter to apply the general principles to the experience of esthetic appreciation. Meanwhile, we can carry on a few simple experiments on sensory appreciation, balance, symmetry, *etc.*

I would be far from denying the value of these simple experiments. They have given a great deal of important information, but I believe any candid psychologist would be ready to admit that the whole sum of information so gained or that ever will be so gained would leave one only on the doorstep of esthetics. Suppose we knew all that psychological experiment could tell us about balance, symmetry, and linear combination, it would still be a long distance from all these facts to the Amiens Cathedral. The rest of it, the psychologist would say, lay in the psychology of the emotions and the higher processes. Granted, and so esthetics must wait until the psychology of the emotions is complete. Thus psychology would tie esthetics to her apron strings with the same convincing logic that philosophy would tie it to hers.

But how escape from psychology, it may be asked. Well, how did psychology escape from philosophy? There is no greater fallacy than the belief that the foundations of a science must be firm before work can begin on the science itself. The metaphor is misleading, for every material advance in the erection of the superstructure brings about a corresponding advance in the making of the foundations. A better metaphor would be of a tree, which must have roots to stand, but whose roots grow with the growth of the trunk and limbs. With such a metaphor in mind it would be no paradox that a seedling science should require only a seedling's roots, and not the broad and systematic radication of an ancient and matured science. Esthetics is a seed dropped from the seedpods of psychology, and may sprout at once in independent soil.

Economics is also a seedling from psychology of such rapid growth that it is almost overshadowing the parent tree. For economics takes its departure too from conscious experience. It is the science of a certain limited group of human desires—*viz.*, those that lead to exchange. And the first rootlet that fed the science and held it in its place was the concept of the economic man, which on analysis proves to be an assumption of the nature of human desires. On that assumption the science grew to considerable size. The assumption has since proved false, but it served to nourish the science while it was young.

A similar assumption is what esthetics needs in order to develop into a science. We shall never get such a science if we wait for the intuitive judgments of critics to become organized into a consistent system: we shall never get it if we wait till philosophy gives us a perfect definition of beauty: we shall not get it if we wait for psychology to clear up the field of consciousness. The three traditional ways of approach to esthetics begin splendidly paved but soon dwindle to ribbon roads and presently are lost in underbrush

and tangle. Esthetics must build its own road if it would be developed. And all that it needs for starting that road is a working unit.

Now, a working unit is a form of working hypothesis, and in this case at least it should not be made too exact or confining, or it will destroy its own usefulness. If the staging for a building is made so solid as to resemble the finished structure, it will cut out the light and hinder if not make impossible the erection of the building for which it was to be a means. The working unit for an independent esthetics should be sufficiently open, and free, yes, and ambiguous, to allow as large a number of men to coöperate under it as possible, and as large a number of pertinent facts to be distributed under it as possible. The aim of a working unit is not to bring exact results but to bring big results.

If there are people who think that big results can only be obtained through exactness, these people are much mistaken. This is a fallacy similar to the one mentioned earlier, the belief that a dependent science can only be developed if the fundamental science upon which it depends has been completed. Science does not build itself up from preëstablished exact units, but moves progressively from inexactness to greater, and greater, and greater exactness. Physics is not yet the exact science it will be. Exactness is derived from inexactness. We lose all if we try to make our working unit of esthetics exact at once, for the chances are we shall make it exact in the wrong direction. We must be satisfied to begin with an inexact unit.

Furthermore, in the early stage of a science it is highly advantageous to employ a unit that is easily understood, a more or less common-sense concept. For in the early stages of a science there is no established school to train men to a method and a vocabulary. The men working in the science will be widely scattered and largely out of communication with one another. If a too recondite term is used by one man, it is likely to be passed over by the others who will substitute some favorite term of their own, and presently there will be no one unit but the same chaos we now have. A recondite term is like a word in a dialect: a common-sense term has a universality and a consolidating power which is worth more than all else in a science struggling for life.

A common-sense concept, not too exact, capable of embracing many facts, and of bringing into at least seeming agreement many men—these are the requirements of a working unit in esthetics. Such a unit, I believe, has been groping its way towards recognition in the last few decades. It is the *liking of a thing for itself* in contrast to the valuing of a thing as a means to something else.

It has been variously called "intrinsic," "disinterested," "independent," "primary" value. It simply marks off the attitude opposite to the practical attitude.

Nearly all prominent estheticians of the last century have this concept at the core of their definitions. So with Bosanquet, Croce, Santayana, Fechner, to mention only a few of the greatest. And notice to what different philosophical schools these men belong. These men differ from each other in their attempts to make their definitions exact. They have in common the core of that inexact common-sense concept of things valued for themselves independent of all practical considerations. They feel, however, that this concept is too wide and attempt to narrow it and make it exact. But the moment they attempt to narrow it they are led one this way and one that according to their personal predispositions and metaphysical leanings. The consequence is that they all begin to quarrel among themselves about the trimmings of their definitions instead of getting down to work and accumulating facts under the core of their definitions. If these men would let the trimmings go, they could coöperate and work in harmony. Not that they should totally forget their disagreements, for out of such disagreements would ultimately come the possibility of bringing greater precision into the working definition. But the emphasis should be thrown on their points of agreement rather than on those of disagreement if progress is to be made in an independent science of esthetics. But, of course, none of these men had any such aim in mind. All I wish to point out is that the unit I am proposing here is not one I have arbitrarily made up, but one that already exists at the bottom of most modern esthetic theory. And all that is needed is to bring this crude core out into the light in all its starkness and uncouthness, and in spite of its unprepossessing appearance to accept it.

What we want at present is not a finished definition of beauty, but something to gather facts about from which generalizations may be made and perhaps laws determined, laws which in turn will eventually refine and make precise the uncouth unit to which they owed their discovery. The unit will circumscribe a field of experience which contains our esthetic facts, and that is all we have a right to ask for in the beginning. If there is hope for a concrete science of esthetics in the near future it lies in some such concept as the one we have been considering. It assuredly does not lie in criticism, or philosophy, or psychology.

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